



JOINT STATEMENT BY NORTH EAST FARMING AND ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Issued on behalf of: NFU North East, CLA, RSPB, Northumberland Wildlife Trust, Durham Wildlife Trust, North East England Nature Partnership, Tees Valley Nature Partnership, Northumbrian Water

Date: 13 May 2020

Responding to the news that the Agriculture Bill is continuing its legislative journey in the House of Commons on Wednesday 12 May, a group of North East farming and environmental organisations are calling on their local MPs to ensure that the Bill secures vital safeguards for the high standards of food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection that the public value so highly.

In a joint statement they say:

Today the Agriculture Bill returns to the House of Commons for its final stages before heading to the House of Lords.

As representatives of farming, environmental and animal welfare organisations across the North East, we urge North East MPs both rural and urban today to take this last proper opportunity to stand up for farming, the environment and rural communities. We hope today that MPs ensure that the Bill secures vital safeguards for the high standards of food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection that the public value so highly. At this time of crisis, there's an opportunity to ensure that farmers across the North East and their fellow farmers across Britain can produce the sustainable, healthy food we need whilst protecting our iconic environment, knowing that they will not be undercut by low standards imports as a result of future trade policy. They need to be able to do this while meeting the public's strong expectation that food standards will be maintained.

The debate on the Bill today comes at a time when, due to Brexit, we are fundamentally reassessing our trading relationship with partners in the EU and across the world. It also coincides with one of the most serious crises the world has faced in a generation in the form of the coronavirus. Coupled with the ongoing challenges of climate change and biodiversity decline, these challenges should focus minds on what exactly we all want British farming to deliver – a sustainable farming system that nurtures our natural environment, while producing food that not only underpins the needs and expectations of our people today but also of future generations.

This will require support from government through both domestic policy and trade policy. The Bill presents an important opportunity to do this, and many of its current provisions will help. There may be a range of views as to the best way of achieving that outcome. But we are all agreed that a trade policy that undermines our farmers by requiring them to compete against food produced to lower standards will mean that our common goal of a more prosperous and sustainable food and farming sector will be made much harder to achieve.

The Agriculture Bill lacks any formal requirement to uphold British farming standards as we negotiate trade deals and in our general trade policy. The Bill should ensure that agricultural imports are produced to at least equivalent environmental, animal welfare, and food safety standards as those required of producers in the UK. There are a number of amendments being brought forward today which seek to achieve this outcome, and we believe the House should support these amendments to ensure the Bill secures the UK's standards. MPs from across the North East must not miss this final opportunity.

We have heard concerns that such an approach would restrict the UK's ability to sign post-Brexit trade deals and would prevent the UK achieving the maximum benefit from its decision to leave the EU. We believe the opposite is true. At a time of global crisis where trade barriers are being built across the world, the UK can demonstrate international leadership in promoting a progressive model of free trade fit for the 21st century. Amending the Bill to enshrine the importance of food trade, but only where high standards of production are met, will allow the UK to be a standard bearer for sustainable production and climate-friendly farming across the world. Our diverse farming and food sector, employing thousands of people across the North East and underpinning the wonderful landscapes so beloved of visitors, is ready to lead the way.

We hope our MPs will actively participate in today's debate. If UK farming is to face the future as a vital strategic sector, producing the food we eat and meeting the challenges of climate change, food security and the high expectations of the UK public in the way we treat our farmed animals and wildlife, the Bill must not undermine that very goal by allowing in food imports that fail to meet its high ideals.

Signed by:

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